

FICTION BY THE BEST WRITERS

CRAZY RIVER BRIDGE

By ARTHUR K. AKERS

"Six P. M. 34.6 feet. Still rising," read the brief report that was handed to Shelburn by a dripping messenger from headquarters. It was the night of the seventh day of almost unrelenting rain, the night of the Storm on the Blue Ridge division. Since noon the Crazy River had been justifying its name, rising in leaps and bounds, led by raging tributaries in the hills. There was gloom in the sky, gloom in the hearts of the bridge and roadway

train possible was annulled and the sidings began to fill to overflowing. At eleven o'clock Mahoney's report read, "43.6. Rising faster. Am putting steam-shovel to work at Monica getting out rock. Need more men. Looks bad."

On its heels came another: "Durban reports dam just gone out on headwaters. Can you possibly come? Mahoney."

Here the big passenger engine that he had asked Bancroft for was waiting to take him to the bridge. "Praise the Virgin, the wind's behind us on this run," said the wiry little engineer, Oliver McCullough, as they sped out through the great yard that covered dripping and almost deserted in the storm. The headlight only sent its ray half the usual dis-

light of conflict. Lanterns flashed wetly here and there. Shouts, the creaking of cars, the puffing and whistling of the locomotives, arose only to be snatched aloft by the wind and be blended in the mad tumult all about. Beyond, lit by the lightning and the head-lights on the engines, were the vast dim lines of the bridge and the wild, tumbling, foaming waters of the Crazy: over all the flying clouds and the writhing blur of wind and rain.

At the little telegraph shanty near the bank Shelburn paused long enough for the news from home and to leave instructions as to finding him. The boy was still holding his own. As he turned to leave he came face to face with his assistant. Hatless was Mahoney, water pouring off his leather clothing, four days' growth of beard on his chin, living in a world that for forty-eight hours had consisted only of a bridge and an insane river.

"Thank the Lord, you've come!" he shouted into his chief's ear through hands held trumpet-wise. In the same fashion he outlined the situation. The flood from the broken dam had not yet reached them, but the rails were now only three feet above the water.

On this side the river was eating at the bank as though trying to leave the bridge stranded over the old channel while it flowed through a new one. Brush mattresses were being sunk under the weight of tons of earth and rock along the threatened railway embankment that was the approach to the bridge. On a slight elevation two hundred yards back the linemen were busy with a shed for the telegraph instruments. The present location would be unsafe when the flood came. Already engines from side-tracked trains farther up the line had been cut loose and sent down to the river to bring back as far as Monica the stalled trains at the bridge. On the other side of the stream Number Fifty-four, the New Orleans Mail, was due but it was not expected that she would try to cross with the river in its present state and in the face of Mahoney's order that no train be allowed on the bridge until the danger lessened. The dispatchers would doubtless hold her at Pilot Junction. Shelburn nodded in token of understanding and took command while Mahoney sought out an engine to take him back to Damascus Junction, where he could have copies of the bridge specifications ready to forward to the builders should the great structure go out. Borne down faintly on the wind came the sound of the blasting at Monica to loosen the rock for the steam-shovel.

As the chief watched the sinking of another mattress the operator handed him a damp, wilted bit of paper. He held his lantern up to it to read, "Not so well. Fever rising. Will wire again in fifteen minutes." He thrust it into his pocket and the man stood on tip-toe to shout yet more ill news. "Pilot Junction says Fifty-four ran by the board there in the storm. She'll be on the bridge any minute now."

Shelburn issued orders as fast as he could make himself heard. One man ran to hold up the dozen cars of stone that were about to be pushed out on the southbound track to help weight the structure against the rush of the Durban flood, another to get the way cleared for the passage of the Mail when she should be over. The waves were on a level with the bridge ties and in torment the big engineer prayed that she would sweep before a wall of water should cross the rails. Now that the northbound track was being blocked by a freight whose rear lights could be seen slowly advancing over it, there was no opportunity to send an engine across in safety to stop Fifty-four on the farther side. Then the red lights halted and from the other shore there suddenly flashed the blinding glare of a headlight through which the rain fell like a thousand darting spears of silver light. Slowly, steadily, the long train drew across the bridge, her bell tolling dimly. Shelburn caught sight of two figures on the right-hand side of her engine's cab as she passed, and afterward he knew that one of them was dead, the body of old "Pap" Sterling who had died on his engine. Like one of the lords of old whose bodies were set at the head of the feast, Pap was making his last run home through the night and the tempest. With quickening speed the cars whipped past and were lost to sight in the darkness and driving rain. The Mail was over and the flood was yet to come. The tail-lights on the bridge receded rapidly now. The engineer on the freight, whom, in spite of orders, "Stubby" Sullivan had hyp-

notized into backing over on it to help hold it down while Fifty-four was crossing, was hurrying back to safer ground. The workers on the tracks scattered again before the approach of the cars of stone that shot through the light of the fires and out on to the bridge, and the scarce-interrupted fight was in progress once more.

On the storm-swept bank Shelburn, with anxiety for his little lad gnawing unceasingly at his soul, set his face like a mask to hide his suffering and watched the battle, directing the re-

pulse of the enemy. More cars of broken stone were pushed out on the embankment where muddy, half-drowned men fought the raging stream desperately with earth and rock and huge mattresses of brush.

A hurrying, anxious figure struggled through the press, seeking the Chief. It was the operator, with news that the wires were gone to the south. "Message coming for you when they failed," he added. "I only got two words of it, 'Liddle is' before they were lost."

Better no word at all than those two which meant the scales had turned, but gave no hint of whether they stood for life or death. Everything faded from the big engineer's vision except a woman who was needing him as she bent over a child in whom their very heart-strings were bound up. "Allah, be merciful to me a coward!" he groaned. "I can't stand this. I've got to go back to them and know."

Heaven and earth careened and rocked and were split asunder by a bolt of lightning that made all things lighter than day. Balls of blue fire skipped over the wind-lashed waters and from point to point of the steel-work of the bridge. For one little moment the wind died and a great far-off murmur was heard that carried a monstrous nameless menace in its sound. Then came the thunder, peal on peal, booming, echoing, rumbling,

was carried far out over the river by the gale. Immediately men appeared fighting their way back into the teeth of the storm to regain the shore. A sound like the soughing of the wind through a thousand, thousand pines, not loud yet seeming to dominate all others, grew and grew. Another lightning flash revealed the peril. Just above the bridge, stretching from bank to bank, a great wave bore down on it. The Durban flood had come.

Clean and bare it swept the bridge. The heavily loaded cars were whirled and tumbled about and smashed against the girders. The water poured over the embankment, tore resistlessly at the earthwork and flooded the rails far back from the bridge. Fires were put out and the men driven to the higher ground. The previous flood-stage had been as a spring freshet to this one. Four times its usual width and flowing three feet above the tracks on the bridge, the Crazy made its final assault upon the thing it hated. Grim and awful was the struggle now in which the human allies of the bridge could only watch and wait. It must make its fight alone and the worn-out men slept wherever they dropped down on the rain-soaked ground, sprawling grotesquely like the dead on a battlefield. Against the leaden sky in the east Shelburn loomed large as he waited for an engine to be sent down to bear him home. The downpour had ceased and the wind was dying away. New fires blazed and smoked feebly because of wet fuel. The Chief found his muscles rigid and his jaw aching with his sympathetic tension at the strain he knew the bridge was enduring. It was as though he beheld the agony of searching glance as he dropped off, weariness of some vast dumb animate thing.

Relentlessly the swollen river hurried itself against the structure. Never a second's rest did it get as the swirling began. For the first time he noticed that Oliver and his fireman were the

great gap in the rails. The sun burst through the clouds and the crests of the river hills were touched with glory, but Shelburn did not see. His face was gray beneath the grime as he swung up into the cab of McCullough's engine and the little engineer, peering into it, knew how he would look when he was old. Oliver said nothing—there was absolutely nothing to say—and he reached for throttle and sand-rod. Twice the steam had shot hissing out through the cylinder cocks when the mud-covered, unkempt figure of the operator bore down on the engine, leaping the prostrate forms of the weary sleepers as he ran. "Message for Mr. Shelburn!" he called as he grasped the hand-hold on the tender.

"Yes, I know," said the Chief dully as he took it. "The boy's dead. He couldn't have lived through the night. I knew that when I came."

The telegrapher gave him a cryptic, searching glance as he dropped off, "Better read it," he suggested.

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